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TRANSCRIPT

Babel: Translating the Middle East

"Max Bergmann: Does Europe Matter in the Middle East?"

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FEATURING

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Jon Alterman: I think when we're talking about Europe and the Middle East, we're really talking principally about three countries, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany. How aligned are they on Middle East issues? How important is the Middle East to their general foreign policy? Have they had the same pivot to Asia that the United States has had? Do they really care about the Middle East?

Max Bergmann: With those three, you have a general alignment. The Middle East has principally become a place of concern when it relates to migration. There's a real focus across Europe on the need for stability, for fear of additional waves of migration which might really upset liberal European politics. There has been a pivot away from the Middle East, no doubt, but that pivot has really been toward Russia, much less so toward China, because Russia is engaging in a war on the European continent.

That's the principal focus of European policymakers. Then, because of the United States really emphasizing the growing concern over China and making China its number one priority, that has therefore become Europe's number two priority in how it views the world. All three of those countries have a real interest in maintaining stability in the Middle East. The United Kingdom and France, in particular, are playing a role in the Red Sea, playing a role in the Gulf.

That will continue. The larger question is though, can Europe develop a more cohesive foreign policy as essentially the European Union toward the Middle East? Because when you talk about these individual countries, they are of declining power on the world stage—the United Kingdom and France in particular. Europe collectively is 450 million people, an economy the size of the United States and China. The question is, can it really assert itself in the Middle East or have a presence in the Middle East that reflects its potential power?

Jon Alterman: Even as individual countries, the Russian economy is arguably the size of the smallest G7 economy, Canada. The German economy is much larger than the Russian economy, the British economy, the French economy. Why is Russia able to be an actor in the Middle East and Europe isn't consequential—either collectively or even individually—on issues that it thinks are important, like migration?

Max Bergmann: Not to paint the Middle East with a broad brush, but I would say it's a hard power region. Russia entered Syria with hard power. It's a player in the region because it has a military presence, it cuts military deals. The Europeans do some of that. There's French arms sales, UK arms sales to Gulf countries. Europe is very weak when it comes to hard power, and it doesn't assert its hard power collectively. You have individual countries like France and the United Kingdom with a real presence, and France particularly playing a role in Syria and in a naval capacity.

These countries are also stretched. When you look at France and the United Kingdom, they both struggle with trying to play a global role, trying to have a role in the Indo-Pacific alongside the United States, trying to play a presence in the Middle East, trying to be the backbone, effectively, of a European pillar of NATO. They can't really do it all, and that is one of the major post-imperial challenges that both the United Kingdom and France are in some ways going through. When you look at what they are going to cut out here, increasingly it looks like the Middle East is where it's going to be hard for them to maintain the same level of presence that they've had historically.

Jon Alterman: It also seems that one of the evolving changes is they have been used for decades to being aligned with the United States. Now, as we've seen in Ukraine, the European instinct, certainly the larger powers in Europe, may not be the same as that of the United States. They may have to act increasingly independently. Is there a way in which Europe really does figure out how to act either in a different kind of complementarity with the United States against U.S. instincts, against U.S. priorities, or does the overwhelming need to act in Ukraine mean that Europe has no bandwidth to do anything else?

Max Bergmann: We're in a really dynamic moment in European politics. To paraphrase Lenin: it feels like decades are happening in weeks. There appears to be a real paradigm shift in Europe where they're beginning to reckon with the potential for a post-American future.

There's been a grand transatlantic bargain between the United States and Europe where the United States provides European security, that's the U.S. role. The Europeans need to spend a bit more—spend more to contribute to a U.S.-led effort to protect Europe. The Europeans are fine

with that. It means that if the United States goes to Afghanistan, the Europeans are there. If the United States asks the Europeans to do sanctions against China, export controls, they do it. What we're beginning to see now is the emergence of a decoupling.

What does that potentially mean for the Middle East? One, there is a real likelihood, it's been talked about for a while, of Europe dramatically investing in its hard-power capacity. Building up its defense industrial capacity to support Ukraine and to arm itself.

Then, once you have done that, once Europe really begins to be militarily powerful to deter Russia, that also has global implications, and implications for the Middle East, both in terms of potential arms sales, but also in the potential for the Europeans to be called on to play certain roles, whether it's naval capacity in the Mediterranean, Red Sea, or the Gulf, or just flexing its muscle as having lots of air power and other capacities. That's still years away, but that's something we could see. The other element is that the Europeans still really believe in the liberal international order.

They believe in open markets and free trade. They believe in human rights and democracy promotion. They believe in foreign aid. When we talk about the United States being the largest foreign aid donor with the collapse of USAID, it's sort of true, but it's actually not. The European Union is by far away the biggest aid donor, because when you take the European Union and the Europeans collectively, they provide, I think, $20 billion more than the United States. What we would see is the Europeans increasingly, in this new realpolitik world, divorce the United States, and really pursuing their own interests.

As I mentioned, their interests first and foremost will be stability. They're cutting deals with Egypt and Sisi. They've shown an ability to put a very realist hat on. They've cut migration deals with Erdogan and have developed their own common European border force, which is accused of human rights violations. They've had this hard edge on migration. You'll then also see them trying to promote stability in Lebanon. They just today announced the removal of sanctions toward Syria. We could see the Europeans increasingly pursuing their own

path. That may run into some challenges internally for Europe when it comes to Israel and potentially Iran as well.

Jon Alterman: Europe has been deeply involved in diplomacy on Iran. Europe is certainly closer to Iran. Every war game I've done that involves an Iran nuclear breakout has involved Europe sitting on its hands and calling for diplomacy at a time when ultimately the United States takes action. What would a more robust European approach to Iran look like? What would its elements be? Would you have the United Kingdom, France, and Germany acting in concert or is there the possibility of one or more of those countries acting alone?

Max Bergmann: I would take a step back and say that this isn't going to be something Europeans are going to pursue right away because it could get them into conflict with the United States and there's going to be so many other collisions that we're having between Europe and Washington. They'll in some ways try to avoid it. When I think about Iran though, the problem is the Europeans can't guarantee the one thing the Iranians want, which is for the United States to not attack it.

Jon Alterman: And they want economic normalization with the United States, and because of the U.S. involvement in international financial regulations in the dollar, Europe can't really get by that. Europe tried and it was unsuccessful.

Max Bergmann: What I could see relates to Iran still providing support to Russia. The assistance is not as consequential as it was in the early days of the war in 2022, when they provided lots of drones. A lot of that production is now in Russia, but Iran recently provided ballistic missiles. If there's going to be any sort of deal, what the Europeans would want is for Iran to stop that. Now, the question of sanctions is really important. There's going to be a lot of conflict between the United States and Europe when it relates to things like the International Criminal Court, where the United States has now put in place sanctions.

And it is now being discussed: what is the challenger to the dollar? It's actually the euro. If the collisions between Washington and Brussels really get out of control and we see the Europeans spending a lot more

on defense, borrowing a lot more, it may be that Europe is willing to then take some financial risk vis-a-vis the United States.

If the United States ever opens up to being willing to negotiate with the Iranians, the Europeans would be very much in favor of that, particularly if it could include provisions or stipulations that Iran stop its support for the Russian war effort.

Jon Alterman: It feels like there's a sequencing issue, that some of the changes you're talking about are going to evolve over 10 or 20 years. With the Ukraine war, the Europeans are trying to find ways to cooperate with the Trump administration in the coming weeks. Is it possible the Middle East provides any opportunities for collective action between the United States and Europe, where the Trump administration feels Europe is providing essential support, and that helps drive cooperation on Ukraine? Or is it more likely we'll do parallel play, and we will do what we do, and Europe will do what it does, and we ignore each other in the Middle East?

Max Bergmann: Ideally our efforts would be coordinated. You can see some of that in Lebanon, how both the United States and the European Union are providing security assistance to the Lebanese armed forces, and perhaps in Syria, where it's an interest in both parties to not have a Russian military presence, to see this government emerge and move in maybe not a democratic direction, but at least in a non-anti-Western direction.

The Middle East, as an issue area, from a European perspective, is now very much downstream from these other critical front and center issues, whether it's Ukraine, whether it's their own defense and the potential for the United States to withdraw forces from Europe, which looks quite possible, whether it's clashing on trade, on tech regulations, all these other things are going to consume transatlantic relations. My guess is that that begins to infect transatlantic cooperation when it relates to the Middle East, and we increasingly see Europe and the United States probably just pursuing different policies or staying out of each other's way, maybe cooperating at the working level, but not making it a huge political deal. I could be wrong there. Maybe this is a place where there's real potential for cooperation.

There's divisions within Europe also when it comes to Israel. Trump's comments on Gaza were greeted with shock throughout Europe. We see splits within Europe, where Spain, for instance, has taken a very pro-Palestinian position while the Germans remain very attached to supporting Israel. There's a degree of lack of coherence in Europe about the Middle East. That may evolve over the next few years. I don't see it happening immediately and impacting how transatlantic relations progress.

Jon Alterman: I want to talk about Palestine-Israel. Do you see a way in which Europe is consequential in what the United States does? Is there a way in which European countries either make a big difference supporting the United States or make a big difference undermining a U.S. strategy because they see it as contrary to their interests? Again, not so much Europe as the European Union, as consensus-driven, but Europe as a collection of wealthy, powerful countries that have their own sense of national interest.

Max Bergmann: Israel is an issue that is going to lead to some clashes between Europe and Washington. It's not the collective European Union, but this is a case where there are going to be some European countries that are going to support UNRWA, that really support the Palestinians, are going to try to take action against Israel, particularly relating to Palestinians in the West Bank and in Gaza. I think for many Europeans, Israel's war in Gaza is a breaking point where it's very hard to go back to have a positive relationship with Netanyahu and this Israeli government.

I think that will lead to clashes with the United States, particularly if the United States maintains its current stance. I don't exactly know how that will evolve, but the major feeling in Europe is one of helplessness when it comes to the war. What we see from the Trump administration is total apathy toward Europe and toward the transatlantic alliance, so not really caring what a lot of Europeans have to say. Europe's ability to then influence U.S. policy, it's going to be very weak, very limited.

I don't really see that shifting unless the Europeans figure out a way to make themselves impactful. But when I think about all the things on the European to-do list, this is further down the list. Also, because it's divisive within Europe. It's hard to see Spain itself being impactful. It

would need to be a more collective European action, and that's where it's going to be difficult.

Jon Alterman: When I talk to people in the U.S. military, the legacy of European ineffectiveness on Libya still looms large. Does it loom large in Europe? Is there a sense that Europe was tested and failed? Is there a sense that there's only so much you can do, so you have to have limited expectations?

Max Bergmann: When you think about the Libya operation, America misunderstood the bargain that it did with the Europeans. The bargain was that the United States handles the hard power side. We just want some European pilots to fly next to American pilots, we want some Europeans to die alongside of us. We have opposed, since the end of the Cold War, the Europeans integrating and organizing themselves collectively on defense, we have opposed the European Union doing anything on defense. To then step back as we did in Libya and "lead from behind" and say, “here, you Europeans, run this operation,” in which they’re not structured to do that, it was no surprise that it was pathetic and limiting.

It also reflected the fact that the Europeans had vastly under-invested in defense. A lot of this is on the Europeans. What we see right now is the Europeans reckoning with that reality, with the potential for the United States to substantially withdraw its forces—that the United States is, at this moment, not seen as a reliable protector of European security. Now, my assessment is that Europe acts to address these problems without simply solving them. We're not talking in 10 years about an EU military or European military, that's like the U.S. military.

I think we will see real concrete steps that mean if there was sort of a Libya 2.0 that needed to happen in 2030, that the Europeans would be much more capable of taking that on. In fact, they're already much more capable of taking that on. I think that was a bit of a wake-up call. The alarm had been going off for the Europeans, and they were hitting snooze. Now they're up out of bed.

Jon Alterman: Let's say we're trying to give them some coffee. Clearly, the Europeans are looking for ways to build patterns of cooperation with the Trump administration. Do you see anything in the Middle East that could or should be a shared project that will show Europe's capacity, show

Europe's seriousness—show Europe's commitment, show the importance of transatlantic cooperation, not only for European interests, but for U.S. interests as well?

Max Bergmann: I do think that there's a real opportunity for Europe to play a really big role in both Lebanon and Syria. Both economies are shattered. Both are at this critical turning point. Europe entering the space, both from an aid perspective and in a military assistance perspective, and a diplomatic perspective to provide some credibility to both governments, strikes me as the Europeans actually have a lot to offer to both countries.

Which then means that the United States shouldn't ignore the Europeans when it comes to both those countries. If I were the European Union, if I were the United Kingdom, France, Germany, that is where I'd focus my efforts. That's what we're beginning to see with European foreign ministers going to Damascus, the removal of some sanctions vis-a-vis Syria, and in trying to make both governments more stable and more friendly with Europe and Western countries.

Jon Alterman: Max Bergmann, thank you for joining us on Babel.

Max Bergmann: Thanks so much for having me.

(END.)